

The Importance of Belonging and Acceptance to Black Student Success

Introduction

The Umoja Community seeks to enhance the cultural and educational experiences of African-American and other students in California Community Colleges.¹ Launched in 2006, over half of colleges across the system now involve students with this approach, which embraces an ethic of love and the deliberate engagement of participants in culturally-relevant construction of knowledge and critical thought. How does Umoja participation impact students' success? What can be learned from students themselves about the role this community plays in their sense of belonging and acceptance on campus?

The Umoja Community Education Foundation engaged the RP Group to conduct a two-part study designed to explore these and other questions--particularly salient given current drive to dramatically increase equitable outcomes across the system (see sidebar, Umoja Evaluation Overview). This brief summarizes the RP Group's approach in Phase 2 of this evaluation, highlights the difference Umoja makes to students' academic and social success, and outlines additional opportunities for future research.

Umoja Evaluation Overview

The RP Group's Umoja Evaluation includes:

Phase 1: Program Coordinators' Perspectives (2018)

Interviews with a representative group of program coordinators from 10 colleges to understand the Umoja landscape and the effectiveness of support to local programs; find the full report [here](#).²

Phase 2: Students' Perspectives and Academic Outcomes (2019)

A mixed-methods study to explore Umoja students' experiences and examine the academic impacts of Umoja participation; find the full research report [here](#).³

The RP Group is conducting this research with support from the Umoja Community Education Foundation. For more information, visit <https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/252>.

Understanding Umoja's Impact on Students: The RP Group's Evaluation Approach

In Phase 2, the RP Group took a mixed-methods approach to assessing Umoja's impact on participants.⁴

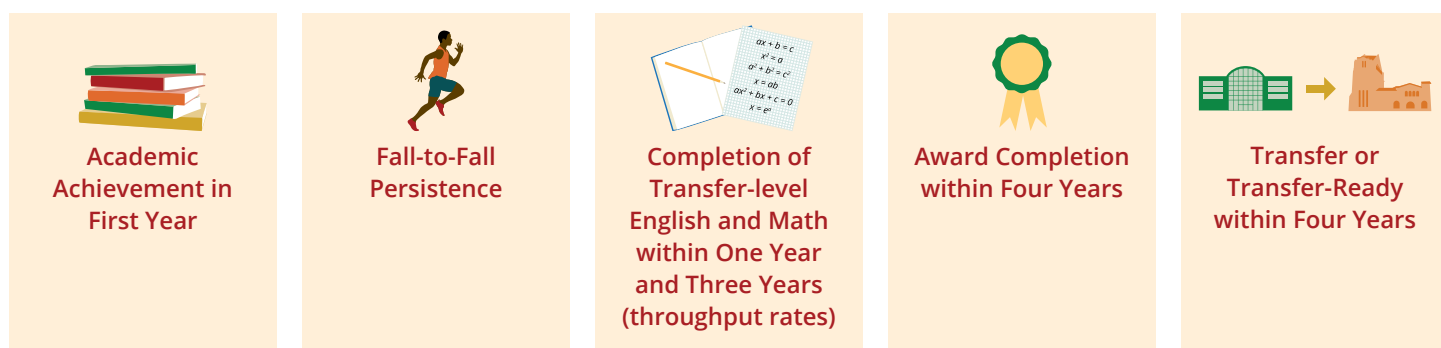
Comparing Student Outcomes. To determine the impacts of Umoja program participation on students' academic achievement, the RP Group compared selected academic outcomes for a cohort of the participating colleges' Umoja students to a statistically-equivalent group of their African-American peers at the same colleges (see Figure 1. Academic Progress and Completion Indicators, and sidebar Umoja and Non-Umoja Comparison Groups).

Umoja and Non-Umoja Comparison Groups

African-American/Black, first-time students enrolled between summer 2010 and fall 2014 at 22 colleges

- Umoja group: 1,466 students, flagged as participants
- Comparison group: 56,316 students

Figure 1. Academic Progress and Completion Indicators



Gathering Student Perspectives. Additionally, the RP Group partnered with Umoja Community leadership to connect directly with participants, exploring how students used and perceived Umoja supports, services, and resources, as well as how various Umoja program and Guided Pathways components could help students clarify, select, enter, and stay on a path, while ensuring their learning.

Making a Difference in Students' Academic and Social Success: Umoja's Impact

Students who participated in Umoja outperformed their peers across several "leading" and "lagging" indicators of success. The analysis revealed statistically-significant differences in several academic outcomes for Umoja students relative to their peers who did not participate in Umoja, including leading indicators or early milestones of progress towards completion (e.g., course success rates), and lagging indicators or completion outcomes (e.g., degree attainment).

Umoja Makes a Positive Difference in Students' First Year (leading indicators)

Participants...

- Attempt (14 vs. 11) and complete (12 vs. 10) more units in their first year
- Experience a much higher persistence rate from their first summer/fall enrollment to the next year (94% vs 79%)
- Successfully completed their first-year coursework at higher rates (55.3% vs. 51.9%)
- Demonstrate higher one-year English throughput rates (25% vs. 12%)

Umoja Students Outperform Peers on Certain Long-term Outcomes (lagging indicators)

Participants...

- Experience much higher three-year English throughput rates (50% vs. 26%)
- Achieved higher transfer-level math throughput rates within three years (17.9% vs. 10.3%)
- Show higher three-year math and English throughput rates (16% vs. 9%)
- Are more likely to be transfer ready within four years (16% vs. 8%)
- Are more likely to earn awards within four years (10% vs. 5%)

Umoja Focus Group Participants

- Recruited from 7 of 10 colleges participating in Phase 1
- Number Reached: 79
 - 30 males
 - 49 females
- Umoja Involvement: 1 to 12 semesters
- Main Goal: Transfer

At the same time, this research showed that Umoja and non-Umoja students did not experience statistically-significant results for a handful of indicators including cumulative GPA in the first year, math throughput rates within one year, pre-AB & 705 math and English throughput rates within one year, completion of a credit certificate within four years, and transfer to a university within four years.

Umoja Values and Practices Contributing to Students' Success

Umoja has a core set of *practices* that frame the structure of the program, inform how supports are offered, and nurture relationships between students, their peers, and the faculty.⁵ Students indicate that these personal connections and culturally-competent teaching and programming were critical to their academic success, continued motivation and focus, and personal growth. Figure 2, Umoja Builds Unity through Community Support,⁶ highlights key program elements.

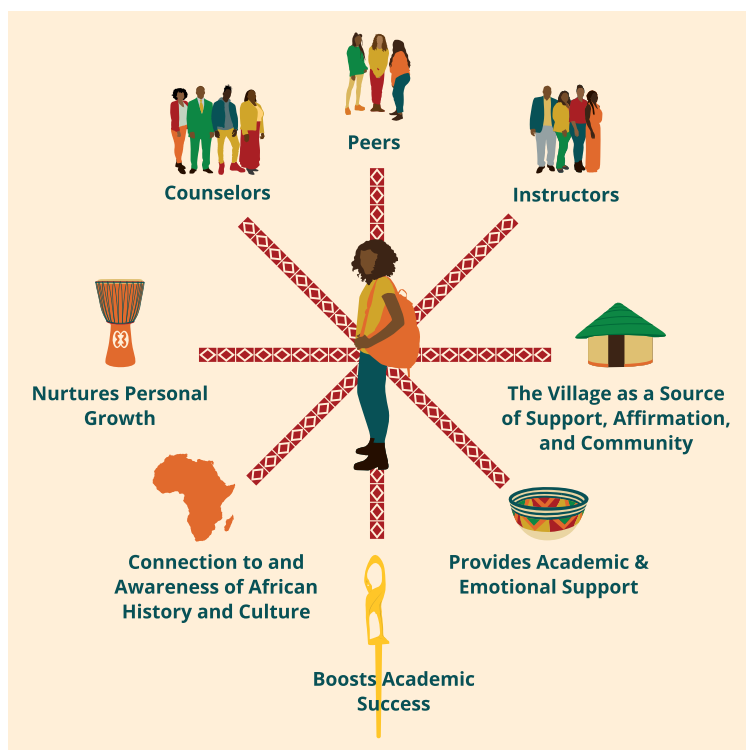
Umoja Courses Foster Deep Student Engagement

When discussing the differences between Umoja and non-Umoja sponsored courses, students reported that **Umoja faculty shared more of themselves and worked to build relationships with students. Faculty also created a space, designed curriculum, and developed assignments that resonated with students' short- and long-term life and academic goals.** Common themes for students included how the program faculty engaged them in their own learning, promoted connections with and among students, and offered strategies and skills to ensure students stayed on and advanced along their educational paths.

Umoja Provides Students a Guided Pathways Experience

Focus group participants completed a rating sheet that asked them to rank the importance of key Guided Pathways elements to their success. Students **tended to rank many of the Umoja program components that align with Guided Pathways framework as critical.** When asked about clarifying the path (Pillar 1), students identified that receiving an outline of courses to take and when they could expect to earn a degree, certificate, and/or transfer (a mandatory Umoja component) as most important to their success. In terms of helping students choose and enter a path (Pillar 2), students rated culturally-competent academic support that addresses real-world issues to help them pass required courses (another core program element) the highest. Students indicated that ongoing, intrusive advising and follow-up by a counselor, such as the dedicated Umoja counselors, were critical to helping students stay on a path (Pillar 3). Students shared that their learning could be ensured (Pillar 4) by providing applied (hands-on), culturally-relevant learning experiences.

Figure 2. Umoja Builds Unity Through Community Support



Students' Recommendations for Improvement

To strengthen Umoja's impact, students recommended more marketing of the program to raise awareness and increase student participation, enhancement of the curriculum with more hands-on experiences, expansion of the type of Umoja course offerings, increases in integrated and just in-time resources, larger dedicated program space, and strengthening of career guidance resources and support.

Further Exploring Umoja's Impact: Future Research Considerations

Results from this study surfaced the following additional areas worth researching in order to deepen understanding of Umoja's impact on students and inform program improvement:

- Linkages between **specific program components** and student outcomes
- Examination of which **program elements have the greatest impact** on student success
- Impact of Umoja program participation on **closing equity gaps**
- Influence of Umoja participation on students' **employment and wages**
- Re-examination of **academic outcomes post-AB705 implementation** to determine any impacts on Umoja students
- **Longitudinal cohort study where** students are followed over a six-year period or longer to examine not just first-year and completion outcomes

Conclusion

The benefits and importance of participating in the Umoja program—the sense of community, the intrusive and personalized counseling and guidance, and culturally-relevant coursework—as reported by students during the focus groups appear to be supported by the academic outcomes. These positive quantitative and qualitative results provide evidence for the program's effectiveness in supporting African American/Black students' success. Moreover, **many of the outcomes included in this study align with and exemplify the goals of Guided Pathways and are measures now used in determining funding to the institutions, equity planning, and developmental education reforms.** In helping to improve outcomes for African-American/Black students, Umoja programs are well-positioned to advocate for being involved in their colleges' planning to address funding and equity.

Umoja's true student-centered approach demonstrates a college's commitment to showing students that they matter, they are capable, they are worthy, and they are deserving of success. In other words, that **they are loved.**

Learn More. Visit <https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleView/articleId/252>

¹ For more information on the Umoja Community, visit <https://umojacommunity.org/our-story>.

² Read *Umoja Community: Insights and Feedback from Program Coordinators on Available and Needs Supports and Resources* on our Umoja Evaluation page, under Resources at <https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleView/articleId/252>.

³ Find a detailed description of the RP Group's Phase 2 methodology in the report *The Ethic of Love: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of How Umoja Supports Its Students' Academic and Life Success* on our Umoja Evaluation page, under Resources at <https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleView/articleId/252>.

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⁵ For more information on Umoja practices, visit <https://umojacommunity.org/v>.

⁶ This figure is from an infographic, *The Ethic of Love*, highlighting key findings from this report which can be downloaded on our Umoja Evaluation page, under Resources at <https://rpgroup.org/All-Projects/ArticleView/articleId/252>.